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ABSTRACT

Although it is now widely recognized that the middle years are a time of development and transition rather than of stasis followed by decline, existing literature tends to portray middle-aged women as generally unattractive, uninteresting, unintelligent and as dependent "labels" rather than persons in the process of growth. To gain a greater understanding of this population, women aged 50-75 (N=60) leading normal, active and successful lives (by community definition) completed a mailed, open-ended questionnaire developed through oral history techniques. Analyses of results showed: (1) women had self-perceptions highly congruent with social perceptions of them; (2) a significant number came from rural backgrounds and from families with strong mother figures; (3) there was a process of disengagement from family dependency toward friendship support groups; (4) unmarried women rated sexuality as more important than did married women; and (5) a surprising number rated activities above their children as more important contributors to satisfying lives. Differences between decade cohorts which occurred in this sample suggest further research to illuminate possible decade patterns which might be related to historical circumstances. (WAS)

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THE THIRD QUARTER

THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY ON ACTIVE WOMEN 50-75

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Presented at the National Council on Family Relations in Washington, D.C., on October 15, 1982.

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ABSTRACT

THE THIRD QUARTER

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NCFR, October, 1982

In this study of women actively and successfully living in the years between 50 and 75, according to social concensus, the subjects were found to have self-perceptions highly congruent with that of the social perception.

A significant number came from rural backgrounds and from families with strong mother figures, against which they measured themselves. In-depth interviews revealed a process of disengagement from blood family dependency toward friendship support groups with many characteristics of family. Unmarried respondents rated sexuality as more important than did those still married. A surprising number rated their children below activities as important contributors to satisfying lives.

THE THIRD QUARTER:

The Influence of Family on Active Women 50-75

Who are the Third Quarter women? They were born from 1906 to 1932--(you're right: that's really 26 years, but our research spans a two-year period). Their birth dates span the period from the introduction of the automobile to its great acceptance as the American form of transportation; from the period of greatest immigration to the United States through the early days of immigration quotas; and from the pre-internationalist days preceding World War I into a period of intense isolationism as major political shifts from monarchy into totalitarian regimes of various politico-economic persuasions changed Europe. Some were born among the economic expansion of wartime. Others at the very nadir of worldwide depression. Third Quarter Women entered life throughout a period of changes in families which resulted in consistently falling birth rates to a time of the lowest birth rates (until the present) in American history and the smallest decade's birth cohort (in the 1930's).

They can be, and many are, mothers and daughters. Are they homogeneous? Never. Their places in history differ markedly--the oldest were young adults in the Depression and child-launching during World War II; the youngest, born during the Depression, experienced their early teens during World War II, and were young adults in the period for women of back-to-home-and-hearth. These differences are reflected in their fertility, their education, their aspirations, and their life experiences.

Then, why do we combine these heterogeneous people with their heterogeneous experiences? What have they in common? For the most part, they are post-parental; they are in reasonable health; they are active, interested, and interesting. They see themselves as part of the mainstream--and they are. All have lived through periods of great social, economic and political change that have colored and directed their lives. They have benefited from advances in medical technology, from the changes in women's roles, and from the increased freedom for self expression. Although to say this obviously ignores a great deal of pain, anguish and uncertainty, most have managed this travail well and, in the long run, have benefited from it. Some have responded superlatively. Others, unfortunately, have been crushed.

In this research, however, we are concerned primarily with the first group--those who have managed well. This is a group which has largely been ignored in previous research where emphasis has been placed either on superlatively successful women, as educators, managers, and so forth--or on those who have fallen victim to circumstances external and internal to themselves. These two groups are more easily identified and appear immediately to have more in common (on a within-group basis) if only because of their marked success or failure.

Theory and Research

Although it is now widely recognized that the Middle Years are a time of development and transition rather than of stasis followed by decline, until recently, surprisingly little research and theory have focused on the process of middle adulthood. The roots of an emphasis on the middle years, however,

are strong and firmly established. Freud's theory of personality development, for example, did not extend beyond adolescence, but his emphasis on childhood as the crucible of adult personality was seminal to the work of Carl G. Jung. Jung conceptualized a two-stage process of continuing development throughout adulthood marked by "mid-life individuation" beginning about age forty and continuing in a process of inner growth throughout the remainder of life.

Erik Erikson has probably been the most influential of the neo-Freudians. His eight stage theory encompasses the lifespan and, although it is male-oriented and detailed primarily only through adolescence, Erikson's concepts have been widely accepted as a base perspective for both research and practice.

Charlotte Buhler undertook the first massive research in life span development. She analyzed individual biographies of a large international and otherwise diverse group to arrive at a five-stage theory dividing life into "growth," "exploration," "establishment," "maintenance," and "decline."

Buhler's student, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, was later to become the mentor of the currently influential theorist, Daniel Levinson. Frenkel-Brunswik continued Buhler's biographical methodology to conclude that persons passed through only three life periods. These she labelled "construction," "culmination," and "reduction."

With her colleagues on the University of Chicago's Committee on Human Development, Bernice Neugarten interviewed thousands of adults during the 1950's. Although Neugarten sees stage theory as of "doubtful value," her work suggests that midlife is marked by a change in lifestructuring perspectives on time; from "time-since-birth" to "time-left-to-live." Neugarten concludes that adulthood must be measured by a social as well as by a biological timeclock, thereby alerting us to possible differences in cohort effects (for example, the intersect of the Women's Movement with age-ascribed roles of women) and, perhaps even more importantly, to the potential value of situational, as opposed to chronological, definitions of life span ages.

During the last five years or so, we have seen a rapid rise in theory, research, and pseudo-scientific trade literature on and about the middle years. A large part of this theory and research has focused on the growth and development of men and the trauma and pathology of women, however. Jaques (1965), Valliant (1977), and Levinson (1978) have, for example, contributed an expanded understanding of crisis, adaptation and transition accompanying development during the adult years. While their work has implications for both sexes, the fact remains that their contributions to developmental theory of the middle years have been based solely upon studies of the life situations of men.

In contrast, recent 'big-sellers' on women have focused largely, not on growth and development, but on pathology and social role decrement. Both academic and popular literature (Lowenthal, et. al., 1975), Jacobs, (1979), Scarf (1980) have presented an aggregate picture of middle years women, particularly of women in their late middle years, as displaced homemakers, empty-nest syndrome depressives, solitary alcoholics, tranquilized

automotons, and in general as unattractive, uninteresting, unintelligent, and dependent "labels" rather than as persons in the process of growth.

Our interest is in normalcy rather than pathology. Specifically, we will report to you our findings on the patterns of family relationships among women who by community definition are successfully living normal, but not spectacular, lives during the years between fifty and seventy-five -- The Third Quarter.

Methods

This study utilized an exploratory design, using oral history techniques to develop an instrument for a mailable interview. Quotations used to illustrate the findings are taken from these oral interviews.

The mailed interview was lengthy and time-consuming. It consisted largely of open-ended questions, phrased to avoid researcher bias. In spite of its length, our response rate was an amazing 83 percent. Respondents answered eagerly, adding as many as six extra closely written pages. Many added personal notes, thanking us for contacting them, commending our interest in normalcy, and offering additional assistance if needed.

The sample includes sixty women between the ages of fifty and seventy-five living in midwest and Pacific coastal states. They were referred by professional associates and community knowledgeables as successfully living normal lives during these years. No definitions of "success" or "normal" were offered to elicit referrals, instead, we outlined the qualities (like alcoholism, depression, etc.) that did not interest us.

The interviews offer many insights into the particulars of women's lives during the Third Quarter as well as into possible antecedent experiences. The findings that follow are based upon a portion of that data.

FINDINGS

A total of 60 women aged 50-75 returned the questionnaire. Table I shows the age distribution by marital status. While it is possible that the divorced category is slightly over-represented in the 50's, it is certain that the widowed are under-represented in the 60's and 70's and that the single are over-represented in the same age groups. However, since this is an exploratory study and the respondents comprise a convenience sample, these aberrations may not be of major significance.

Two-thirds of the respondents in their 50's and 70's reported having been rural dwellers at some period of their lives as did half of the respondents in their 60's.

Table II shows the distribution of answers to the question "Which parent had the greatest influence on your life?" by age and marital status. It is interesting to note that the mother was designated by a clear majority of persons in their 50's in all marital status categories except the divorced. However, among married respondents in their 60's, more indicated father than mother and the only respondents to deny the importance of both parents were married and in their sixties. In the seventies, numbers in all categories

are small, but the mother seems to be slightly more influential while a greater proportion cited "both" than in the other categories.

> Age 56 and Married: This has been a very stimulating exercise for me because I have just realized how very much my mother has influenced my life! Her goals, ideals and intelligence is a thread throughout my life.
>
> Age 61 and married: My father was closer--he showed me his weaknesses.
>
> Age 73 and widowed: I was an only daughter and enjoyed being "special"--doing outdoor things with my father.
>
> Age 71 and widowed: My mother was a strong woman. I think, unconsciously, I still measure myself against her role model.

Respondents were asked about the influence of siblings in their lives; however, the period of their lives to which they responded was not standardized, and many in all age groups did not respond to the question, while others were only children. Of those who responded, almost equal numbers across the age groups said brothers, sisters, and both. In the 50's, more cited sisters while in the 60's, more cited brothers. It is important to note that "influence" was deliberately kept vague so that influence could have been seen as positive, negative, or neutral. Indeed the point was made by some respondents that the influence was not always "friendly."

> Age 54 and divorced: My brother and sister were a lot older--almost like "fun" parents. They were, and are, terribly important to me....that they like me, you know.
>
> Age 63 and married: My mother liked my sister. She was pretty and feminine. I was a tomboy. My father took me everywhere with him--til I was six and my brother was born.

In terms of present life, Table III indicates the importance of sexual activity by age and marital status. Although the results appear to be fairly conventional in that as age increases the numbers reporting sexual activity to be important decreases, there are several interesting features in this table. In the sixties, although more married women reported sex to be relatively unimportant, most of the single women considered it important. In the seventies, a sizeable majority of the widowed also reported sex to be important. Only in the seventies was the question unanswered. Among those in all age groups who reported sex to be important, some indicated that the nature of sexuality was changed. Touching, tenderness, and gentle caring were emphasized.

> Age 51 and divorced: Sex? I forget what that is! You haven't asked, but this is the one big shortage in my vital and healthy Third Quarter. To my regret. Certainly, it's important, but I--unfortunately--can testify that it can be done without.

Age 56 and married: Sex gives a woman a sense of belonging and being loved...After the change of life, when the fears of pregnancy have been removed, sex becomes a joyful sharing.

Age 64 and married: I feel cheated. I thought it was "forever" for us--and now he thinks, says, he's too old. I just want to touch him--to be close. Orgasm doesn't matter that much...

Age 69 and single: Even at this age, I am not closed to the possibility of enjoying sexual intimacy with a man I love if the circumstances are "right" for both of us. Sex is acceptable and gives pleasure and satisfaction in later life.

Age 71 and married: Sex is important in the later years but it is different than when one was young. Deeper meaning, precious moments in the relationship and learning to know each other in another dimension.

Age 73 and widowed but currently partnered: Of course sex is important. In later years, a man's ego is so fragile because of waning sex powers. A woman can make or break a man. You don't even have to get to the going-to-bed stage to make a man feel good about his sexual powers if you know how to make him feel good about himself. Sex is mutual trust--mutual sharing.

In a forced-choice question, respondents were asked to indicate the current major source of pleasure in their lives. Choices were: family, people (other than family: friends, organizational memberships, etc.), activities (gardening, fishing, crafts, etc.), job, or religion. Table IV indicates these pleasure sources by age and marital status.

A striking feature of this table is the relative unimportance of the family, regardless of marital status. Only about a third of the married women mentioned family as a prime source of pleasure; none of the widowed cited family; one-third of the divorced did as did two of the nine single women.*/ Further, very few of our respondents volunteered information about children--even to mentioning their existence--though, if asked, usually responded in a positive way.

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*/Although most research points to the continued importance of the spousal relationship, in no case did the majority of married women indicate family as the first source of pleasure. Family, however, includes more than spouse--children, siblings, and parents as well as more collateral relatives. Troll, Miller and Atchley (1979) report that morale among older people (generally defined as over 65) is more closely associated with friends and neighbors than family in a study by Arlington (1976). Further, they report that Shulman (1975) found "...that married women are less involved in kinship networks than are women of other marital status. The never-married saw their parents and siblings somewhat more frequently and the widowed the most. The same pattern holds for interaction with children for those women who had children" (1979, 87). Clearly, there is a need for more work on this point. Socioeconomic factors, race, marital status and perhaps region need to be considered in any research on this topic.

On Spouses:

Aged 51 and divorced: Even my ex-husband is something of a friend by now. I mean, after all, we had good kids together.

Age 55 and newlywed: My husband and foster son add a lot to life. My brother and I are very close at this point in life.

Age 58 and widowed: If I can't have Van, I don't want anyone.

Age 59 and married: My husband is the most exciting part of this. He has changed and grown too. How lucky I am.

Age 61 and married: My husband! My love!

Age 64 and married: So you see, I have some real conflict. I love Riley...But I feel he's always held me back--kept me down--to feed his own ego.

Age 70 and married: He's my husband and my friend. I love him.

Age 73 and widowed: I'm so glad we had a few good retirement years to spend together. He always accepted me as I am--let me feel free.

On Children:

Age 58 and married: Haven't I mentioned my children? I guess that's right. I love my boys--but they have their own lives to live, you know. And so have I.

Age 64 and married: I don't depend on my children. They're at a busy time of their lives too. In fact I worry about my daughter. I think she's trying to be too close to her teen-age daughter. I'm afraid they're going to hurt each other badly one of these days.

Age 71 and widowed: Of course I love (my son). And I'm pleased he's so successful. It hurts that my grandson doesn't come to see me. I don't want to be dependent--I'm trying to plan so I won't be.

Activities were cited in all age groups about as frequently as family. Another striking feature about responses to this question is the low salience of job as a source of pleasure. In the fifties, 18 of the 23 respondents were employed outside the home; in the sixties, half (10 of 20) were employed. Yet only four respondents, all in their fifties, cited job as a prime source of pleasure. Of these, two were married, one widowed and one divorced. None in the sixties mentioned job. Although "people" were cited as the major source of pleasure by one-third of the respondents, this response was clearly related to age. One-eighth of these in their 50's responded in this way as did one-third of those in their 60's; fully two-thirds of those in their 70's indicated "people" as a major source of pleasure. Surprising also was the lack of response to religion--only two persons, both married with one in the 50's and one in the 60's, so responded. Finally, one woman in her 60's indicated she had no source of pleasure.*/

> Aged 51 and divorced: I enjoy my job--colleagues and clients--and my new sense of competence.
>
> Age 71 and married: Especially enjoy organization work; travel to foreign lands; enjoy antique car tours and collecting clothes to wear in our 1909 Cadillac--great adventures.
>
> Age 68 and married: I am most appreciative of good and lasting friendships...It makes me happy to be surrounded by beautiful things and life's comforts. But sharing is the most important part of my life, though I don't have an abundance of monetary accumulation.
>
> Age 71 and widowed: For the first time in my life I have a little time...I love it!

Responses to a question about the most important life quality, designed to gain insight into self-perceptions of the developmental "tasks" of the third quarter, are shown in Table V. While a minority in each age group opts for "all," in the 50's and 70's, the plurality chose "satisfaction." In the 60's, the largest group chose "growth" as did a smaller number in the 50's. Only two in the 70's indicated "growth," however. No clearcut pattern emerges from marital status. It appears, however, that women in this age group have abandoned "happiness" as a single life goal--if they ever held it--and are looking toward "satisfaction" (which, of course, could include happiness) or a combination of goals.

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*/ This respondent clearly was disturbed as several of her responses indicated a lack of involvement and the probability of deep and perhaps suicidal depression. Given the circumstances of this study, all appropriate and possible steps were taken to assure that interventive action become available to her.

Finally, in Table VI, we examine the adjectives that were used by respondents to describe themselves in the Third Quarter. Since all adjectives used were tabulated, the total numbers bear no relationship to the number of respondents. Related adjectives have been combined into single categories. Most striking, perhaps, are the number of times happy and joyful (linked because of an "active" quality) were found among respondents of all ages, but particularly by those in their 70's. The combined category of content, fulfilled, relaxed secure and comfortable also was used by those of all ages but particularly by those in their 70's. Indeed, relaxed and secure were only used in that age category; while "comfortable" was mentioned both by those in their 60's and 70's. Indeed, relaxed and secure were only used in that age category while "comfortable" was mentioned both by those in their 60's and 70's. Challenging and thought-provoking, used frequently by those in their 60's and somewhat less by those in their 70's, was never chosen by the 50's group. On the other hand, exciting was never used by the 70's. Afraid/uncertain were qualities mentioned only by those in their 50's and 60's, while "satisfying" was used by only one person in her 70's but by several that were younger. Some patterns of adjective usage seem to invite further research since they are linked so closely with age. Care must be taken to determine whether these "patterns", however, are age or cohort related. If the former, they might provide some insight into personality and self-perception changes with age.

On "ME":

> Age 51 and married: I feel I am changing and growing. It's frightening and even frustrating at times. At times, I like myself for daring to risk and initiate change...I sometimes don't like myself when I feel I try too many things and someone gets hurt because I don't have time for them..like friends--and family.
>
> Aged 64 and married: I think I'm "neat." I used to think I couldn't do anything. Now, I go ahead and try. You know what? I can do almost anything I put my mind to--better than a lot of people. This is the happiest, most satisfying--and the most thought-provoking--period of my whole life.
>
> Age 77 and single: Well, I rather like myself. In fact, I can be very happy alone. Prefer it to the company of bores. I think I have come to terms with what I can do and can't do. I'm not perfect or remarkable; but, fundamentally, I'm a decent person. I'm glad I've been able to make some contributions to the welfare of my fellow beings.

Conclusions

Who are the Third Quarter women of our study? They are heterogeneous in every way. They see themselves and are seen by their communities as part of the mainstream. We found them thought-provoking and sometimes surprising.

We were surprised that so many of the women indicated that their mothers had been their parent of influence since some of the existing research (e.g., The Managerial Woman by Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim) indicates that

highly successful women, born within our time period, clearly saw their fathers as more important. Differences between decade cohorts which occur in our sample leads us to suggest further research to illuminate possible decade patterns which might be related to historical circumstances.

Although the usual patterns in relation to age and importance of sex holds for the overall sample and for married women, the surprise occurs in the importance of sex for the widowed, divorced, and single women in all age levels. Are the married living with what is? Are the non-married living with what might be? Only further research will tell.

Striking throughout the interviews and questionnaires has been the salience of self for all respondents regardless of marital status. This is illustrated in this paper by first source of pleasure in which "family" was cited by relatively few, thus indicating, perhaps, the less-than-expected centrality of the husband and children. Indeed few respondents volunteered information about children as first choice, and none talked about parents or parents-in-laws.

These findings appear to fly in the face of other research on the family which indicates the high salience of that institution throughout life. Is it possible that we as family researchers have, because of our pre-conceptions, questioned our respondents in such a way as only to elicit responses indicating the high salience of family? Is it possible, further, that because of our underlying assumptions about the necessity and centrality of continuing importance of family, we have never allowed our respondents to represent themselves as people rather than as family members? Our use of the open-ended question has yielded some unusual information.

Perhaps because respondents were free to answer as individuals rather that as representatives of a family structure, their selves could be expressed in more salient dimensions.

Whether these findings can be replicated remains to be seen. Whether they are related to chronological age, historical era, or cohort situation becomes a matter for further exploration.

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TABLE I. AGE BY MARITAL STATUS

Age	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Single	Total
50's	16	3	4	1	24
60's	15	1	1	4	21
70's	4	6	1	4	15
Total	35	10	6	9	60

TABLE II. PARENT OF INFLUENCE BY AGE AND MARITAL STATUS

Age	Marital Status	Parent of Influence: Father	Mother	Both	Neither
50's	Married	5	9	2	
	Widowed		3		
	Divorced	2	2		
	Single		1		
	Total	7	15	2	
60's	Married	7	6		2
	Widowed		1		
	Divorced		1		
	Single	1	3		
	Total	8	11		2
70's	Married	2	1	1	
	Widowed	2	3	1	
	Divorced		1		
	Single	1	2	1	
	Total	5	7	3	
TOTAL		20	33	5	2

TABLE III. IMPORTANCE OF SEX BY AGE AND MARITAL STATUS

Age	Marital Status	Important	Not Important	No Answer
50's	Married	15	1	-
	Widowed	2	1	-
	Divorced	3	1	-
	Single	1	-	-
	Total	21	3	-
60's	Married	6	9	-
	Widowed	-	1	-
	Divorced	1	-	-
	Single	3	1	-
	Total	10	11	-
70's	Married	2	2	-
	Widowed	4	2	-
	Divorced	-	1	-
	Single	-	2	2
	Total	6	7	2
TOTAL		37	21	2

TABLE IV. SOURCE OF PLEASURE BY AGE AND MARITAL STATUS

Age	Status	Family	Activities	Job	People	Religion	None	Total
50's	Married	6	5	2	2	1	-	16
	Widowed	-	1	1	1	-	-	3
	Divorced	2	1	1	-	-	-	4
	Single	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
	Total	8	8	4	3	1	-	24
60's	Married	5	4	-	5	1	-	15
	Widowed	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
	Divorced	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
	Single	1	1	-	1	-	1	4
	Total	6	6		7	1	1	21
70's	Married	1	-	3	-	-	-	4
	Widowed	-	2	-	4	-	-	6
	Divorced	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
	Single	1	1	-	2	-	-	4
	Total	2	3	3	7	-	-	15
Total		16	17	4	10	2	1	60

TABLE V. MOST IMPORTANT LIFE QUALITY BY AGE AND MARITAL STATUS

Age	Status	Happiness	Growth	Satisfaction	All	Death	None
50's	Married	1	4	8	3	-	-
	Widowed	1	-	-	2	-	-
	Divorced	-	1	2	1	-	-
	Single	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Total	2	6	10	7		
60's	Married	3	6	4	2	-	-
	Widowed	1	-	-	-	-	-
	Divorced	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Single	-	2	-	1	1	-
	Total	4	9	4	3	1	
70's	Married	1	1	1	1	-	-
	Widowed	1	-	3	2	-	-
	Divorced	-	-	-	1	-	-
	Single	1	1	1	-	-	1
	Total	3	2	5	4		1
TOTAL		9	17	19	13	1	1

TABLE VI. FREQUENCY OF ADJECTIVE USAGE TO DESCRIBE SELF IN THIRD QUARTER BY AGE

Adjectives	50's	60's	70's
Busy	6	9	6
Happy/Joyful	7	6	12
Content/fulfilled Relaxed*/ Secure*/ Comfortable**	7	6	15
Free	5	4	3
Challenging/Thought-provoking	-	1	5
Exciting	5	3	-
Changing/ Growing* Expanding**	11	4	2
Afraid/Uncertain	6	2	-
Satisfying	5	5	1

* Only mentioned by 70's.

** Only mentioned by 60's and 70's.

All adjectives were tabulated so that the number exceeds the number of respondents. Additional adjectives used were: active (70's), adjusting, ambitious, angry (50's) , bored (50's), cheated (60's), creative (50's), fortunate (70's), fruitful, frustrated, fun, good/best, healthy, hurting, interesting, learning (50's), lonely, loving, new (50's), productive, successful, suicidal (60's), tired, varied (70's), vibrant/vital.